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ABSTRACT

An English professor used science fiction to introduce his students to a range of questions about alternative sexualities. While a course proposal for a science fiction class being taught as a "diversity offering" with an emphasis on gender and sexual orientation was working its way through the bureaucracy at Pennsylvania State University, University Park, the professor used some of the same science fiction in his freshman composition course at the McKeesport campus. Reading and writing assignments progressed from topics that offered the students more common ground to topics that demanded more critical reassessment of their received beliefs. Assignments on the texts were designed to help students to hear the narrative voices that treated lesbian, gay, or bisexual characters as ordinary, even respectable, beings. The number of students who refused to stay in the classes was abnormally high. The average course rating was the lowest for any course taught by the professor. Written comments indicated that the focus in alternative sexuality in the assignments drove down course ratings. Many of the students had not reached an intellectual development that enabled them to reprocess their own belief structures or to construct alternative perspectives. Concentrating the entire syllabus on material with gay, lesbian and bisexual import may have worked against the intention to present these sexual minorities as ordinary, acceptable, human beings. Future offerings of the course will not focus exclusively on sexual minorities. One table of data is attached. (RS)

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Constellation Prizes: Using Science Fiction for Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Issues in College Classes

Of the various ways that I have used science fiction in my classes, I admit that using it as an introduction to questions of alternative sexuality was not the first to occur to me. After working with the genre for fifteen years, however -- fifteen years that marked my own coming out and my increasing preoccupation with such questions -- I became increasingly aware that science fiction offered at least three qualities that suited it for such a role.

First, the recent history of the genre has been characterized by a growing proportion of women writers, women who have challenged its masculine traditions with feminist perspectives even as their work has enriched its style with thoughtful characterizations and imaginatively envisioned worlds. Writers like Joanna Russ, Alice Sheldon, or Octavia Butler have generated numerous stories in which technological extrapolation has been stretched into trenchant questions about human sexuality and gender definitions. For Russ, in particular, such questions often overlap with overtly lesbian concerns. In short, the writers and the stories exist in growing numbers to substantiate a connection between the genre and alternative sexualities.

Second, the genre's penchant for generating alternate worlds readily accommodates itself to alternative sexualities. Projecting our own world into one of many possible futures is only one strategy that allows writers to envision basic permutations in our sexual identity. Alternate histories, parallel universes, trans-galactic homes to other intelligent species -- all have been used as settings for

changed societies and changed biologies in which heterosexual, featherless bipeds can appear as yet another of the universe's true curiosities.

Third, science fiction's willingness to remold the human body and the human species itself generates a diversity of populations to inhabit all those alternate worlds. The well-known cantina scene in George Lucas' *Star Wars* hardly begins to encompass the galactic ark of aliens, androids, clones, cyborgs, mutants, symbionts, and transmorphic exotics that science fiction writers have depicted. Many of these beings feature radically different sexualities and genders, like the Oankali of Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis Trilogy*, who have three sexes and at least that many parental roles.

Aware of such qualities in science fiction, I felt that I could indeed use it to introduce my students to a range of questions about alternative sexualities. With the genre challenging some basic orthodoxies of heterosexuality, I wanted the students to see how a Russ or a Butler had rethought our human categories of sex and gender. Further, I wanted them to see how other writers, like a Samuel Delaney or an Elizabeth Lynn, could develop sympathetic stories around characters who might be lesbian, gay, or bisexual -- evoking an essential humanity amid the diversity of sexual expression.

As I was developing these expectations about the connection between science fiction and alternative sexualities, my university was developing the context that would enable me to make this connection in the classroom. In 1990, The Penn State University Senate added "cultural diversity" courses to our graduation requirements. Included in the list of diversity categories -- along with race, religion, ethnicity, and gender -- was sexual orientation. Subsequently, I participated in three annual meetings that focused on the acceptance of all minorities in the classroom and across the university. Encouraged by these

meetings, I proposed that my section of science fiction be taught as a diversity offering with an emphasis on gender and sexual orientation.

While this course proposal was working its way through the bureaucracy of approval at University Park, I decided to anticipate the process locally by including some of the same science fiction in my freshman composition class. Since this proposal had to be approved only at my own campus in McKeesport, I was able to work with these stories a year before I could include them in the science fiction course.

One of the books I planned to use in the science fiction class was an anthology of lesbian and gay science fiction called *Worlds Apart*. I decided to use this anthology as the basis for the readings and topics in the composition class. In the science fiction class, I supplemented the anthology with four novels that also featured lesbian, gay, or bisexual characters: John Varley's *Titan*, Linda Mixon's *Glass Houses*, Maureen McHugh's *China Mountain Zhang*, and Ursula K. LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

As I developed my syllabus for both courses, I tried to schedule the reading and writing assignments so that the course would progress from topics that offered the students more common ground to topics that demanded more critical reassessment of their received beliefs. In the composition class, this arrangement meant that the earlier readings offered a greater tolerance across the rugged divides of sex and gender. These were stories like Edgar Pangborn's "Harper Conan and Singer David," in which the love of the two men is accepted by narrative voice, parents, and community as an essential feature within the complementarity of their art.

In contrast, the later readings offered a greater challenge to the dominance of men and heterosexuals, preferring to segregate the opposing sides or to reverse the usual hierarchies. Thus, the last story we read was "Houston,

Houston, Do You Read?" by James Tiptree, Jr. (a pseudonym for Alice Sheldon). In it, the last three men are killed off by the surviving women, who determine that men have become "irrelevant."

In the science fiction class, I divided the term into three sections, the first focused on sexual distinctions, the second focused on gender distinctions, and the third focused on stereotyping. Here, too, I was making an effort to move from topics with greater common ground to topics with less. Each of the sections included readings from *Worlds Apart*. In addition, the first included John Varley's *Titan*, with a bisexual female protagonist and a centaur-like alien species that requires three partners and a two-stage mating for reproduction.

In the second section, we read Maureen McHugh's *China Mountain Zhang* and Lisa Mixon's *Glass Houses*. McHugh's Zhang, a beer-drinking, gay-male construction worker, eventually works his way to a university education and a career as a "daoist engineer." Mixon's protagonist is Ruby, a beer-drinking, lesbian salvage operator, who uses industrial-strength robots on the job, a kind of deconstructive construction worker.

For the third section, we read the most stylistically difficult work on the syllabus, Ursula K. LeGuin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*. Using a series of myths as cultural background and a male human narrator with imperfect and limited perceptions, LeGuin traces this narrator's interaction with an alien species of unusual sexuality, the Gethenians. Although human in appearance, the Gethenians become female or male only during "kemmer," a monthly phase of sexual arousal and responsiveness; at other times, they are neither. To the Gethenians, the male human, able to perform sexually at any time, is a "pervert."

In the writing assignments for the two courses, I tried to follow the patterns I had laid down in the readings. For the first composition assignment, I asked the students to write about their expectations and reactions as they read the first

assignments in *Worlds Apart*. By the final assignment, I was asking them to critique the suitability of Tiptree's story for several different courses. In the science fiction class, I asked them to respond to a set of essay questions in four installments. I called their responses a journal, but the format was more like that of a serialized take-home examination.

For both courses, I wanted the writing assignments to move the students beyond their own experience into the circumstances of the stories. For the most part, their own experience is unlikely to include much personal contact with sexual minorities, and any experience they may have had is, most likely, negative. I was not surprised when one of my students wrote of friends from high school whose only contact with homosexuals occurred when they went "fag-bashing." Nor was I when a second student described how she was deliberately mistaken for a lesbian and harassed because she had refused to join in the harassment of another employee, who was gay.

In some small measure, then, I wanted the writing assignments to begin to offset the burden of such negative experiences. In focussing the assignments on the texts we were reading, I hoped that the students would begin to hear these narrative voices that treated lesbian, gay, or bisexual characters as ordinary, even respectable, beings. And beyond this hope lay another, more tentative one: that their writing process itself might help them to reconstruct some of their received attitudes toward sexual minorities.

The course-drops and the evaluations for these classes suggest how difficult the realization of such hopes can be. The number of students who refused to stay in the classes was abnormally high. When students who had enrolled in the composition class saw the text and the writing topics, enrollments dropped by twenty percent. While these departures blessed me with fewer papers to grade, the number was significant for a course that all Penn State University

students are required to take. Others would have dropped the section, I am sure, had they been able to find an alternative that would have fit their schedules. Ordinarily, of course, freshman composition sections close out. In science fiction, which is one of a dozen options to satisfy a humanities requirement, twenty-five percent decided to drop. Here, too, the decline runs counter to my experience with other elective courses, which tend to pick up a few more students at the beginning of the term. I was not surprised to see, however, that the students who dropped were males.

The data from the evaluations evince a similar pattern of resistance and bias. Table 1, appended to this text, compares the overall evaluations for course and instructor in these classes with evaluations for another freshman composition section and a set of elective arts classes that did not use these materials. On a seven-point scale, the rating for the composition section that used these materials is 1.16 points (20%) lower than the rating for the section that did not. Almost identically, the average course rating for science fiction is 1.15 points (23%) lower than that for the arts elective. In fact, the course rating of 3.92 for the science fiction class is the lowest one ever given to a course that I have taught. This outcome may also reflect the fact that the class was almost ninety percent male.

Evidence from the written comments that accompany these ratings indicates clearly enough that it is the focus on alternative sexuality in the assignments that drives the numbers down. In the composition evaluations, eleven out of eighteen students cite gay and lesbian subject matter or name the anthology, *Worlds Apart*, as the feature they liked least about the course. Another five cite the reading matter less specifically, but I am inclined to interpret those, too, as dislike for the content rather than the genre. As one student put it, "I feel this should not be forced on a student paying \$2,400 a semester. Please keep sexual preferences [sic] to yourselves [sic] and don't force students to read and

write about this." A few other students focused their objections on the exclusive use of gay and lesbian readings, suggesting that one or two such stories would have been enough. In the science fiction class, the proportion of students objecting to the topics was slightly lower: seven out of eleven. Some of those who did object, however, expressed themselves with more vitriol: they did not like "talking about gays, faggots, & lesbians" and recommended that I "drop the fag & dyke shit." I would guess that both of these writers were male.

The course-drops, the ratings, and the comments suggest, I think, not only the scope of the challenge in the students' attitudes, but also some further challenges that science fiction itself may pose when connected to alternative sexualities. Let me tag these challenges as cognitive and generic. By cognitive, I mean that many of the students have not reached a level of intellectual development that enables them to reprocess their own belief structures or to construct alternative perspectives. They find it difficult to connect with fictional characters and settings that lie beyond their personal experience. Science fiction compounds this difficulty by devising characters and settings that can be, literally, light-years from home. Consequently, some of the very features that I anticipated would be advantages in connecting science fiction to alternative sexualities may have worked against my effort to engage the students with these stories.

In addition, concentrating the entire syllabus on material with lesbian, gay, and bisexual import may also have worked against my intention to present these sexual minorities as ordinary, acceptable human beings. As Paul Puccio suggested at the 1989 National Conference for Teachers of English in Baltimore, the "assimilationist" impulse to emphasize the similarities between sexual minorities and a straight majority is at odds with the "separatist" impulse to emphasize differences and seek tolerance for diversity. The diversity course with a special focus does not convey commonality. Using science fiction may even have

exacerbated the students' inclination to deny the underlying, common humanity by associating these minorities with alien species or atypical sections of humanity.

I tagged the other challenge that I saw generic. By generic, I mean that science fiction, as a genre of popular literature, remains encumbered with an aura of masculinity. Earlier, I mentioned that an increasing number of women have been expanding what the genre does. Nevertheless, much of the genre retains the boyish appeal of its adolescence: narratives that are thicker with action than they are with emotional or social substance and a catalogue of techno-toys that can be exploited for fantasy fulfillment. That such features appeal more to males is reflected in the disproportionate number who enrolled in the science fiction class: thirteen out of fifteen. When I look at the lower course ratings and the cruder comments elicited by the science fiction course, I see a group of mostly male students who enrolled in the course expecting the action and technical gloss of the science fiction they already knew. Instead, they found their expectations doubly confounded by a selection of readings that did not prize action over more complex themes and a set of assignments that stressed discomforting topics of gender and sexual orientation.

Having assessed the gap between my strategies for these courses and their audience, I am already adjusting what I will do next time I teach the courses. Neither the topics nor the reading lists will focus exclusively on sexual minorities. I will not forsake my underlying objective: to encourage my students to rethink their beliefs about sexuality and gender. But I will approach that objective with more modest expectations, reminding myself that one class -- at their age and in this location -- can not reconstruct their deeply seated perspectives.

When I applied for the job at McKeesport, the administrator who interviewed me also admonished me, "Joe, this area is pretty conservative." My experience with these courses would not gainsay her estimate. In this experience,

however, I find one of the compelling reasons for teaching these courses as I do.
For if I can make this effort and do not, who -- I ask -- should make it in my stead?

APPENDIX

TABLE 1: EVALUATIONS
Course and Instructor Data

Course	<u>Course</u>	<u>Instructor</u>	<u>Course</u>	<u>Instructor</u>
FrCmp (with)	4.47	5.21		
FrCmp (no)			5.63	5.63
SF (with)	3.92	5.38		
Arts (no)			5.07	5.38